

INTERVIEW WITH BILLY JOE HAWTHORNE
BY JERRY FRENCH DECEMBER 4, 2001

MR. FRENCH: This is Jerry French. It's the afternoon of December 4, 2001. I am at the home of Billy Joe Hawthorne. Bill is an old friend of mine. We are going to do an oral interview with him about his career with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Bill, if you would care to start off, and tell us a little bit about yourself; your education, and how you happened to come into the Fish and Wildlife Service, and then some of the various jobs that you had as you went through your career and how you ended up.

MR. HAWTHORNE: I'll give you what I think I can recollect from over the years. It's a pleasure to do this, by the way, and a pleasure to see you again too. I grew up in south central Nebraska, down in corn country, south of the Platt River and Grand Island, Nebraska. I was born in 1939. I ushered in the end of the Dust Bowl period, my Dad tells me. We lived on a farm out there. At the end of my high school education my dad asked me if I was going to be a farmer. I was the last of four boys, and none of the rest of them had farmed. I asked him if we were making any money, and he told me that we weren't making a cent. I then told him that I didn't believe that I would be a farmer then. He then said, "Well good, neither will I!" He sold the farm that summer and we moved to Longmont, Colorado right north of Denver. That's when I became acquainted with Colorado State University. I always had a great love for the outdoors; hunting and fishing and the wildlife that went with it. So in the fall of 1956 we moved to Longmont, Colorado and I enrolled at what was then Colorado A&M. I stayed about five quarters at A&M. I think I snuck out just before they were getting ready to send me out because my grades weren't really that good. To make a long story short, I tinkered around a little bit at a couple of jobs in the Longmont area. Then I went into the military and spent four years in the U. S. Air Force. I came out of there in 1962 and tinkered around in a couple of other fields that weren't to my liking. I still had the urge to go back into wildlife. In 1966 I reentered what was then Colorado State University at Fort Collins. I was able to finish, and get my degree in Wildlife Management. I graduated in March of 1969. I guess the way that I got into the Fish and Wildlife Service was this; I went up to a "Wing Bee" held up at Fort Collins. When I went to the "Wing Bee" there was a fellow by the name of Red Shelton who was a Biologist in the Region 2 office in Albuquerque. He was there, and we got to talking. Red encouraged me to send him an application. He said they had a couple of jobs coming open. There was one at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Roswell, and the other at Havasu National Wildlife Refuge in Needles, California. To make a long story short, I was offered which ever of those jobs that I wanted when I graduated in March. I got out in the spring quarter. I told Red, "I spent two years in Roswell in the Air Force and really didn't like it. So I think I'll go to Havasu." That's how it started out. All of my career by the way was in Region 2. I look back and sometimes I think that was good. Sometimes I think it would have been good to expand my career into some other regions. But it didn't work out that way. I enjoyed Region 2. I enjoyed the entire career that I had there. And I think that if I was to do it over again,

I'd probably do the same. At any rate, I started out at a pretty shaky appointment, which was to last six months at Havasu. It was not a permanent, full time position. But Mark Nelson, who was the Chief of Refuges in Region 2 told me that if I went down and did a good job, he would make sure that when my temporary appointment expired they'd do the best they could to try and get me a full time job there at Havasu. So my wife and I; we didn't have any children at the time, packed out bags and I took off with a U-Haul trailer pulling a Volkswagen Beetle. I had two dogs on my lap. I headed down two weeks ahead of my wife to move in to our dream home there. It was in government housing there in Needles, California. She was to join me two weeks later, and I spent the better part of that two weeks trying to get that house where I figured she wouldn't leave me on the first night that she got there. You've been in government housing, Jerry, so you know what I'm talking about. There was about three inches of crust inside the oven. I cleaned that up. I cleaned the windows, and stove and refrigerator. When she joined me two weeks later, we had a good time at Havasu for about three years.

I spent a lot of my time at Havasu up and down the river. The Colorado River is still one of my favorite spots in the world. We did a lot of enforcement patrol. I did some plain table mapping of a portion of the upper portion of Havasu Lake. We were doing some siltation studies to determine how long it would be before many of those wetlands actually silted in from the Colorado River flow. I worked about a year under Refuge Manager Blaine Graves. Then Blaine transferred from Havasu and we were without a Manager for a good period of my time there. Stan Cornelius, the Assistant Manager was Acting Manager in Charge. I assisted Stan a lot, since he didn't have an assistant. I got to do a lot of Assistant Manager duties that I wouldn't have otherwise got to do. Along about 1972; this was those times in the Fish and Wildlife Service when you applied for every job that came out on the 'green sheets' that you thought you'd like. Then one day you'd get a call from the Regional office wanting to know when you would be ready to go to your new assignment, the assignment of their choice! I was called by Mark Nelson at one point there, and asked if I wanted to venture off to Tishomingo, Oklahoma to be the Assistant Manager to Ernie Jamison. Well, I had met Ernie in 1970 in Albuquerque when we, at that time took our forty hours Law Enforcement training. I sat next to Ernie and we visited. I liked the old Cajun a lot. When Mark Nelson asked me if I wanted to be an Assistant Manager to Ernie, I didn't give it a second thought. I just said, "You bet, I'm ready to go!"

I had a lot of good experiences there at Havasu. One of the things that sticks in my mind about my first assignment at Havasu was this; that was the days before we had any money to buy new trucks and buy new vehicles and buy equipment and all of the things that I believe most Managers enjoy these days. We looked more like the Laurel and Hardy movies on Monday morning, going around to find out where you could find a tire to put on the vehicle that you were going to use that day to get where you were going to go to do your work! We had flats, and we had batteries down. Nothing would start. The equipment was just really in a shambles. We had mostly rejected stuff from the

Korean War. That was our bread and butter equipment. Most of the things that we had were just in a state of disrepair. We didn't have good equipment at that first assignment. It got a little better as I went from station to station. And as time went on, the equipment really did improve considerably. I was glad to see that. In about April of 1972 we loaded up a U-Haul trailer. This time my wife accompanied me on the trip. We headed for Tishomingo on the north side of Lake Texoma, outside of Tishomingo, Oklahoma. This is a beautiful wintering waterfowl Refuge primarily for Canada Geese and a lot of Mallards and other things. They had a good farming program going on and a good hunt program and a good fishing program. It was really to my liking. I did get to work side by side with Ernie Jamison who is still one of my idols as far as Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Managers. He was, in my opinion, one of the better ones in the country. Ernie gave me a lot of good training. He gave me a lot of leeway to do things. We worked side by side. We actually lived on the Refuge, again. I lived right across the street from Ernie. We were boss and employee, but we were also good friends and compadres. We did a lot of hunting and fishing together. We worked together on a day-to-day basis. I can truthfully say that all of the years that I've known Ernie; we never had a time when we had any disagreements. We were just a pretty compatible pair.

Tishomingo was an area where you got a lot of introduction on Law Enforcement. We kept a good Enforcement presence on the Refuge. We also had a good farming program farming corn, milo and winter wheat for the Canada Geese when they came in. I guess being on my first really big waterfowl refuge; the first year when those Canada Geese started flocking in to that Refuge, it was just a darn good feeling to see the fruits of your labors all of a sudden come to fruition. We had a good hunt program. We had a portion that was a Wildlife Management Area coordinated with the State of Oklahoma's Wildlife Department. We manned a hunt Check Station, and we had assigned blinds in what we called the "big bottom", which was our hunt area over there. It was a real pleasure to run that hunt, and be involved with the hunting public. It was not without it's problems, but it was a good experience. We had a great crew. We had a great crew at Havasu too, I should say. I wouldn't slight them a bit. But we had a really good crew at Tishomingo. We had a lot of fun with them. My gosh, I could go on for hours about the things that they pulled on me in breaking in a new Assistant Manager!

I guess I forgot to mention that my son was born while we were back there at Havasu in 1970. We brought a kid into the Fish and Wildlife Service at that station. We brought my daughter into the Service while we were at Tishomingo. My son Seth is now 32, and my daughter Shannon is 28.

We had been at Tishomingo for about three years when the regional office called me once again, and asked me if I was interested in being the Biologist at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. I told them that I needed to think about that a little bit. Tishomingo was a place that I really wasn't real anxious to leave. I was enjoying my job. I was enjoying the area. We had a good family life going there and everything. But I talked with Ernie,

and Ernie was my mentor. He said, "Bill, you need to get some good coastal experience. Coastal experience is necessary." He had come up from Lacassine and Sabene and some of the Louisiana coastal Refuges and he felt like to round out my career, some coastal experience would be essential. So, in May of 1975, we headed south to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, the home of the Whooping Crane. I really enjoyed the stay at Aransas NWR, although this was the first Refuge where we lived off of the Refuge. I wouldn't want to do that again. I'd like to live on the Refuge. Particularly in the early years, it's a good place to raise a family. It's a good place to live. And on your off duty time, you can be bumming around out there checking to see that goes on, on the Refuge. We lived about thirty-five miles from there in Port Lavaca. We bought our first house there. I drove back and forth on a day-to-day basis. My work at Aransas Refuge was real interesting. I got to do the winter Whooping Crane surveys by plane. I think I was the first person to be able to see sixty-nine Whooping Cranes in one day. Of course that's been surpassed. We're glad to say that that has been surpassed many times since then. But when I was on the Refuge, we peaked out at sixty-nine birds. We also worked with the oil and gas industry. There were some pipelines coming across the Refuge. We had a huge pipeline construction project going while I was there, and I got to be the coordinator with the pipeline company. I was making sure of permit compliance and environmental considerations were all taken into account. We had to see that they were done properly, so I did get some exposure to that.

MR. FRENCH: Bill, let me interrupt you for just a minute. When you were at Aransas, you worked for one of the great characters of the Region at that time; a guy named Frank Johnson. Could you tell us about Frank?

MR. HAWTHORNE: Yes, I did! There isn't anything to say, other than that Frank was a jewel! Frank was an old fella from Mississippi. Frank Johnson was probably one of the jewels of the Refuge System. He was just a real character. He was smart like a fox. Frank just was an enjoyable person, and he knew how to run a Refuge. He knew exactly what was needed, and he knew how to handle his people. He knew how to handle the community, which was a thing that Ernie Jamison did well too. Frank did the same thing. Frank and his wife Una lived there on the Refuge. I can't say enough about the old redhead because he was just a peach to work with. He was a character! Everybody that knew Frank loved him. Everybody that knew Frank would remember him for the remainder of their lives. No doubt about it! He had some sayings. He could come up with stuff off of the wall that would just crack you up. But to work with the guy, he always gave you free reign, but he also guided you too. He'd been around. And I tell you; I was in the Regional office when I heard of Frank's death. He had died in the night, in his sleep. I don't cry very often, but I went in and shut my door and the old tears just flowed. We lost a good friend when we lost Frank. He was.....

MR. FRENCH: He was the only one there ever has been!

MR. HAWTHORNE: They threw away the mold when they threw away the Frank Johnson mold, that's for sure! I am glad you brought that up because I should have mentioned it. Yeah, Frank was a jewel!

After completing almost two years there at Aransas, as a Biologist, I got a call from Gordon Hansen who was the ARD for Refuges in Region 2. Gordon called and asked me if I would come in and serve a couple of years in the Regional Office as an Ascertainment Biologist. They had a big thrust going. It was called the Category 8 Program. It was the utilization of Duck Stamp moneys to acquire prime wetland habitats. What they were doing was preparing a Category 8, which was the Texas Gulf Coast region. It was a Category 8 land acquisition program. Well, or habitat preservation program; not necessarily a land acquisition program. It was any combination of things that would set aside those areas in perpetuity to maintain the waterfowl habitat and waterfowl values that they presented. What they wanted me to do was to come in and join others that they were bringing in to be an Ascertainment team and start looking at these areas for their waterfowl habitats and for their inclusion into the National Wildlife Refuge System. Once again, I drug my feet just a little bit. I had always thought that the Regional office was probably not for me. But there was a little persuasion and I was on my way to Albuquerque, New Mexico. We moved in July of 1977 into Albuquerque. I came in under Tom Smith, who was the head of Realty. I've got to tell you; you know you have a lot of people who help shape your career. I mentioned Ernie Jamison and Frank Johnson. But Tom Smith, after I got into the Regional office, probably had more to do with the shaping of my career. He was a real strategist as far as land acquisition procedures, Fish and Wildlife Service goals, and how it fit into the whole big picture. I learned a lot from Tom Smith. And I continued to learn a lot from him. Tom and I traveled together a lot. We worked together a lot, while I was in Realty. Of course we worked a lot together after I went out of the Division of Realty later on. Tom Smith was another one of the good mentors in my career. He really gave me a lot broader perspective of what the Fish and Wildlife Service was all about; what we should have been looking at and doing, and how we should be including more lands and waters into the National Wildlife Refuge System.

I worked at that land acquisition position for several years. This was in a time when we had area offices in place. There was a fair amount of 'rub' at the time, as you remember, between the area office and the regional office. [All laughing]

MR. FRENCH: That puts in very mildly!

MR. HAWTHORNE: I tried to stay neutral in that, and I think I did a pretty fair job of staying neutral. But there was still that 'rub', particularly at the higher levels; the ARD levels and the Area Managers' levels. Tom Smith, again, whenever we traveled we worked through the area office. We never tried to work around the area office on the things that we did in land acquisition, knowing that what we were doing was for the good

of the entire resource, not just a certain office. That was another good learning experience. Learning how to deal with some of these rubs, if you will, and get through them without offending either side too much. The program that we were working on, the Category 8, we ended up acquiring a good deal of lands on the Texas coast, which are now National Wildlife Refuges. My career changed a little bit at that time. I had been pretty much promised that if I were to come in and give a couple of good years and then, I could not necessarily write my own ticket, but “show us where you’d like to go, and we’ll see that you get there”. A couple of opportunities came up that I thought would be good to go to. I punched my ticket, but my ticket didn’t get punched back. So, through another little reorganization that came about, I was asked if I was interested in going back into Refuge Operations; which I was. They came up with the Zone Supervisor jobs and the Region was broken down into three zones, I believe at the time. Coastal Texas was one of those zones, and I was asked if I was interested in being an Assistant Zone Supervisor, to Steve Smith who was going to be the Zone Supervisor. This was as Area Offices were closing.

MR. FRENCH: I remember that.

MR. HAWTHORNE: I gladly took that, because I did want to get back into Refuge Operations in some way, shape or form. This looked like a good avenue. I think probably, the remainder of my career is pretty much history. I went from Assistant Zone Supervisor later on, to Zone Supervisor of that Texas coastal region. Then, in later years, they reorganized again and they put all of north Texas and Oklahoma together with coastal Texas, and I applied for and managed to get the Zone Supervisors position. I was an Associate Manager. I believe that’s what they were called at that time. I worked the remainder of my career doing that. Those jobs, working with the Refuges were another highlight of my career. That interaction with Refuge Managers, their staffs and crews, was just...you talk about enjoying what you’re doing on this Heritage committee business, there was nothing better in my career than being a Supervisor of a refuge from the Regional office and going out and interacting with those people on the Refuge. I was getting to see what they were doing, and letting them show me what they had accomplished. They told me what their goals were and what they had envisioned to do on that refuge and how I could help them with funding or staffing or whatever assistance I could give in the Regional Office from my position. That was great. I am going to tell you a story, just one story. That was at Salt Plains. I know that you are familiar with Salt Plains.

MR. FRENCH: Absolutely! Yes, sir!

MR. HAWTHORNE: I went out, and Rod Crie was the Manager. This was when we had the Maintenance Management system. I don’t know if they still have that or not. But we had Maintenance Management funds. Each year you had to dole out so much to each refuge to meet their needs. When I got to Salt Plains on that Monday morning I went in and had a cup of coffee with Rod. The crew came in and said, “Bill if you’ve got

a few minutes, we'd like to show you something". I told them I'd be out in just a few minutes. I went and had coffee with Rod and then I walked on out to the maintenance area there. They had the props all set. They had a low boy, which only had a single rear axle, and they had an excavator all ready to lead. They said, "Now, we want you to watch this". They used that excavator a lot, in a lot of different areas. They had to transport it at the Salt Plains area, and to other refuges. When they started that excavator up on that low boy, it just raised the back end of that tractor up clear off of its wheels. You talk about something just as unsafe as it could be! Then they backed it off, and said, "We knew that you needed to see this." So I went back in, and Rod and I talked a little while. Of course, he had a new tractor and lowboy on his Management Maintenance list, but it was quite a ways down in his priorities. We visited a little while, and before I left that day we had that low boy back up on the top of that Management Maintenance needs list at Rod's station. And the next year, when I went to Salt Plains; and this wasn't planned or anything, but I happened to arrive at Salt Plains on my next visit the day after that new lowboy came in. It was a dual axle tractor.

MR. FRENCH: It's called 'career timing' I think!

MR. HAWTHORNE: It was perfect timing, and it wasn't on purpose! But those kinds of things were the rewards of the job. Because here was a crew who were so tickled with that new piece of equipment that was going to do the job that they needed it to do, and do it safely and do it without any problems. That's just one of a number of things that I could relate to. But it was those kinds of things; going out to the refuges and interacting with the people. I learned something from Mark Nelson who was an excellent Supervisor in my opinion. Mark never went to a refuge without rubbing shoulders with everybody, and hearing what they had to say. I made it a point to try and do that every time that I went to a refuge. I tried to meet and visit a little bit with each individual. I felt like I made a lot of friends out there. And I felt like I left a lot of friends when I retired. I didn't leave them. I just went to a different part of my life. The refuges were, and I am sure are still filled with lots of great, dedicated people who enjoy what they're doing. They are doing things for the critters. It was a great life.

MR. FRENCH: Bill, during your interview it just dawned on me that my time in the Service was about the same as yours. I was in the Army when you started. I got out in 1970 and went to work in Arizona at the Fish Hatchery. We both spent our entire career in Region 2. And as far as I know, you and I are the only employees who worked in all four states of the region and never left the region. John Brock has done all four states, but he did go to Louisiana for a while so he is not in our club any more!

MR. HAWTHORNE: You know, that's right!

MR. FRENCH: One thing, because your career has about mirrored mine; we worked for three very different, but strong people. Could you just make some comparisons between

W. O. Nelson, Mike Spear and John Rogers? They were completely different in the way that they handled their jobs. But you worked closer with them than I did. Your insight could be quite valuable.

MR. HAWTHORNE: I have to think about that a little bit. W. O. Nelson, I probably, well, not probably, I did interact and work much more closely with Mike Spear than I did with the other two. I worked very little with John Rogers because I was on my way out. I was fairly new and low grade and what have you when I came in to the Regional office. So I didn't work real closely with W. O. Nelson. I didn't get to know him real well. However, I always felt that W. O. Nelson was a very strong Regional Director in the areas that I was acquainted with him. Again, I don't want to say too much about W. O. Nelson. I think he let people do their work. I didn't ever feel that he prohibited anybody from getting the work done. But my involvement with Regional Directors has to be much stronger with Mike Spear. Mike Spear, I worked very closely with him. He was very land acquisition conscious. He was refuge conscious. He seemed to support all of the programs. W. O. Nelson did that also, and I sure John Rogers did too. Mike Spear was a very strong personality. I always got along very good with him. I think that there were some that didn't, obviously. [Mr. French laughs] But if Mike liked you, and liked what you were doing he was very supportive of you. I traveled a lot with Mike over the years going to refuges and various land acquisition things when I was an Ascertainment Biologist. I always felt that Mike was probably most responsible for me getting the other jobs that I got in the Refuge Operations Division. Mike was very supportive of the refuge acquisitions. He was very supportive of the refuge programs. I liked working with him.

MR. FRENCH: You know, of course, this is your interview but sometimes I look back and I think about these people. And I remember W. O. as being a very strong, 'people person'. Whatever people needed, that's what he worked on. Mike was very task oriented. These other things went to the side. And I remember John as being a very good scientist. Each of these people was very strong in their disciplines, but not necessarily in the others.

MR. HAWTHORNE: That's true. I always felt comfortable around all three of them. I got to know John Rogers when I was in upper level management training. My thirty-day assignment outside of the region was in the Anchorage office. John was in Anchorage at that time, so I got to know him then. But again, I didn't work long enough under John Rogers when he was the Regional Director to be able to compare him much.

MR. FRENCH: He was only the Regional Director for two or three years, so I am not sure any of us got a very strong feeling. But that was my feeling.

MR. HAWTHORNE: I worked the longest with Spear. I had nothing but good support and good relationship with Mike.

MR. FRENCH: Bill, unless you have something else, we're about to wrap this up. But I've got two questions, which I like to ask of each employee. What was your most difficult assignment? And what was your most enjoyable assignment? You've already stated your most enjoyable, but I'll let you state it all over again, if you want to think about this! Each of us have had some difficult tasks. In some, the pay just wasn't enough. And other times, the jobs were so good it was a crime to even take pay!

MR. HAWTHORNE: Yeah! You know that I don't know that I could really pin down my most difficult assignment. I've had a difficult day or two. But for the most part, I don't really consider that I have had any really difficult assignments Jerry. My most, well, I've had so many enjoyable ones, that it's kind of hard to pin down too. It's one of those things that's kind of an evolution. At the end of my career, if my wife and I were to go back to Tishomingo, nothing would be the same. But when we were there from 1972 to 1975, it was perfect. It was perfect to our liking. I loved the job. I loved the Manager I was under. I loved the work. Everything was great. If I would have gone back there even five year later, in a different capacity, probably it wouldn't have been the same.

MR. FRENCH: Yeah, the clock has moved.

MR. HAWTHORNE: Yeah, the clock has moved. Later on in my career, as you move up the ladder a little bit, the Associate Manager and Zone Supervisor positions, I loved. I loved getting out with the people. I loved being able to impact what got done on those refuges through my supervisory work there in the Regional office. I expect that if I was to be real honest, I just thought of something that was probably my most least; and this is only a task. It's not my assignment or anything else! [Mr. French laughing] It's the dadburned bureaucracy! When it come time for instance, to; here I am sitting with I think at one point in my career I was supervising fifteen or sixteen people. It was performance evaluation time. I had to do the performance evaluations for those sixteen or seventeen people. Not only that, but then I had to turn around and do the performance evaluation; I had to provide all of the input for the performance evaluations of the ARD, the Deputy Regional Director and the Regional Director!

MR. FRENCH: And those are difficult!

MR. HAWTHORNE: Talk about something you didn't want to do!

MR. FRENCH: It's difficult to say, 'you, up there, did not do what I thought was an outstanding job'.

MR. HAWTHORNE: That's right. You could pretty much be frank with the people that you were supervising. But it was a little difficult when you had to start putting

down all of this “rigormoral” for the people above you. And why should you have to be doing it? There were a lot of things like that, but that’s government and that’s bureaucracy and all of the other things. But if they ever find a way Jerry, to get rid of some of that stuff, it would be a better life for those that are working now, I’ll tell you.

MR. FRENCH: Well, unless you have something else, we’ll conclude this interview.

MR. HAWTHORNE: I think that probably says as much as I need to say for one day. And I enjoyed it!